

What Makes the Common Good Common? Key Points from Charles De Koninck¹

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In even the most capable philosophical hands, the common good remains a slippery concept. Its essence eludes the grasp of those who reach for it. This is due in part to the concept's complexity. "Common good" is composed of two rich, philosophically pregnant notions: goodness and commonness. Reflection on these two notions is ancient, of course. How a thing is good has preoccupied philosophers since the dawn of time. How a thing may be common has exercised philosophers less throughout history, but even the ancients recognized that the question of a thing's commonness remains as intricate as the question of a thing's goodness. Despite their long philosophical history, however, the notions of goodness and commonness evade quick and easy description. Because they represent elemental characteristics of being itself, they share in being's fundamental mystery. As a result, millennia of reflection have not exhausted these notions' meanings. Like being, goodness and commonness require careful study by each generation, so that its intellectuals and teachers might clarify these notions' remaining secrets. Thus does each generation contribute to the perennial philosophy.

When we modern and post-modern thinkers try to describe the common good, and thereby grapple with its notions of goodness and commonness, we find one of these two notions more elusive than the other. Which of the two might surprise us. It is not the common good's goodness.

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Despite the philosophical confusions of our age, we more or less still agree publicly as to what constitutes a good, and as a result what constitutes an evil. We deem health a good, for example, while we deem disease an evil. We embrace one as perfective; we repulse the other as destructive. To my knowledge, no one has yet extolled COVID-19 as a good. So, we moderns and post-moderns have not completely lost hold of reality. We still share a sense of goodness, even if our generation mislabels some evils as goods.

When it comes to describing the common good, therefore, it is not the common good's goodness that eludes us. Rather, it is its commonness that we have difficulty grasping. What does it mean for a good to be common? How is a common good common? Are all common goods common in the same way? How is the example of health common? Is health a common good properly speaking, or does it only appear to be common? How do we know the difference? Is there a difference? Unfortunately, few of us can answer these questions well. The reasons may not all be our fault, but we should admit that, along with our secular contemporaries, we remain largely unversed in commonness. A sign of our inexperience with the concept is that we seldom ask questions about commonness. Instead, we take it for granted that we know what commonness involves. When pressed to describe it, however, we quickly discover just how uncommon understanding of commonness is.

In the first half of the last century, Charles De Koninck was well aware of modernity's inexperience with commonness. He recognized that individualism and its philosophical prerequisites had so captured the popular imagination, even among Catholics, that the common quality of the common good was disappearing from view. As a result, political discourse—to say nothing of political life—had entered serious difficulty. Between the World Wars, De Koninck spoke up among Catholic philosophers to remind them of the “primacy of the common good,” not simply as a practical concept but as a speculative one, in accord with its classical conception.

De Koninck recalled for his contemporaries not only *that* but also *how* commonness, like goodness, is primarily something objectively real and metaphysically constituted, and only secondarily something subjectively perceived and practically useful. To revive the objective and metaphysical notions of goodness and commonness among Catholic intellectuals—many of whom had traded these for easier subjective and practical notions²—

² De Koninck pointed to Fr. Herbert Doms's instrumentalization of the marital good in his *Dom Sinn und Zweck Der Ehe* (1935), and to the instrumentalization of the

De Koninck composed his famous essay *The Primacy of the Common Good, Against the Personalists*.³ In it, De Koninck spends eighty pages reviewing the objective, metaphysical notions of both goodness and commonness, aiming his explanations at correcting modernity's speculative depreciation of the common good. To this end, De Koninck does not treat the notions of goodness and commonness equally. In the entire essay, he dedicates only three sentences to reviewing the common good's notion of goodness. In the whole rest of the essay, he reviews the common good's notion of commonness. This is remarkable. De Koninck knew his audience, and he spoke directly to its difficulty with grasping not goodness but commonness. Accordingly, De Koninck aimed to revive the notion of commonness for modern thinkers, and thereby to render the common good intelligible again—not only as good but also as ontologically common—in philosophical and political discourse. For the sake of the saving the embattled common good of the political community, De Koninck wanted his modern readers to appreciate the common good again as St. Thomas and the medievals had, and as Aristotle and the ancients had before them.

In the short sections that follow, we shall review De Koninck's work in *The Primacy of the Common Good* to revive the concept of commonness. Unfortunately, his argument there is neither systematic nor linear, so we are forced to extract from his text the principles that he employs to explain commonness. We shall examine four of these principles: (1) the more diffusive the cause, the more elevated it is; (2) the common good is distinct from the particular good; (3) the common good is not a composite of particular goods; and (4) a good common *in causando* is distinct from a good common *in praedicando*. None of these principles alone exhausts the richness of the common good's commonness, but all together they paint a metaphysical picture in which commonness, properly understood, appears in sharp relief.

political good by Mortimer Adler and Fr. Walter Farrell in their "The Theory of Democracy" (*The Thomist*, 1941), as examples of subjective analyses of the common good displacing objective ones.

³ Charles De Koninck, *La primauté du bien commun, contre les personalistes* (Québec: Éditions de l'Université Laval, 1943). All translations from the original French are my own. For a translation of the entire text, see Ralph McInerny's in vol. 2 of *The Writings of Charles De Koninck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 63–163.

The More Diffusive the Cause, the More Elevated It Is

In *Primacy*, De Koninck reviews the notion of the common good's goodness in only three sentences, as was just mentioned. These sentences read: "The good is what all things desire inasmuch as they desire their perfection. The good therefore bears the note of final cause. Accordingly, the good is the first of causes and, consequently, diffusive of itself."⁴ We need not comment further on this review, except to note how it ends. The last of the good's qualities that De Koninck mentions is the good's self-diffusion. This is significant, because De Koninck's review of the common good's goodness ends where his review of the common good's commonness begins. It is precisely in the good's self-diffusion that De Koninck locates the good's potential to be common.

The first step that De Koninck takes toward describing the commonness of the common good, therefore, is to note that not all goods, as final causes, diffuse their goodness to the same extent. Some goods communicate their goodness widely to a number of effects, while others diffuse their goodness narrowly to only a few or even to just one effect. As a result, goods naturally rank themselves hierarchically according to the extent or reach of their self-diffusion. Within this hierarchy, widely diffusing goods rank higher than narrowly diffusing goods. To underscore this point, De Koninck quotes from Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "It must be acknowledged that the higher a cause is, the more it extends its causality to many. A higher cause thus has its own proper higher effect, which is more common and is found in many things."⁵ What De Koninck derives from Aquinas's observation here is a simple syllogism that describes the commonness of higher causes. The higher a cause is, the greater its diffusion. The greater a cause's diffusion, the more beings it affects. Consequently, the higher a cause is, the more beings it affects, or the more common it is. To climb the scale toward higher causes, therefore, is to climb toward increasingly common causes. "Common" here emerges as a term denoting the extension of a thing's goodness, as a final cause, to two or more effects. The goodness of the thing is common to its multiple effects.

Once De Koninck draws speculative attention to the metaphysical ordering of higher and lower causes, he makes a practical observation. Because higher causes extend themselves more widely than lower ones,

⁴ De Koninck, *Primauté*, 7.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *In VI metaphys.*, lec. 3, no. 15. Translations from the original Latin of the works of Thomas are my own.

they demand a higher and nobler love from their participants. De Koninck supports this claim by citing a long passage from Aquinas's commentary on the *Ethics*. In this passage, Aquinas accounts for Aristotle's assertion that statesmanship ranks highest among the practical sciences.

It is clear that every cause, inasmuch as it is stronger and more important, extends itself to many proper effects. Therefore, the good, which carries the note of final cause, and inasmuch as it is stronger and more important, extends itself to many effects. Thus, if the same end were the good of one man and of the whole city, it seems better by far and more perfect to undertake—that is, either to procure or to save and preserve—that which is the good of the whole city than that which is the good of one man. Now, certainly it belongs to the love that obtains among men that a man should strive for and preserve the good even of a single individual, but it remains better and more divine that this love should be shown to the whole nation and to cities. That is to say, while indeed love should be shown to only one city, by far it remains more divine to show this love to the whole nation, in which many cities are contained. [Aristotle] calls “more divine” that which relates more to the likeness of God, who is the universal cause of all good.⁶

Within this text, De Koninck finds Aquinas's rationale not only for considering higher goods better and nobler—and thus more loveable—than lower ones, but also for distinguishing common goods from particular goods. This passage from the *Ethics* commentary provides De Koninck a key principle: the universal extension of higher goods. For Aquinas, the universal extension of higher goods carries an air of divinity. For De Koninck, however, a good's universal extension points to a more basic reality. “The common good differs from the particular good,” De Koninck writes, “according to this very universality.”⁷ In keeping with the ontological character of his study, De Koninck identifies in the universal extension of higher causes the metaphysical principle that distinguishes a common good from a particular good.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *In I eth.*, lec. 2, lns. 170–188.

⁷ De Koninck, *Primauté*, 8.

The Common Good Is Distinct from the Particular Good

De Koninck's identification of a metaphysical distinction between common and particular goods is important, if only because the metaphysical distinction is not obvious at first glance. The logical distinction between these goods is much more likely to catch our attention. For example, it is impossible to mention the common good without also calling to mind the particular good, at least indirectly. The same is true when calling to mind the particular good: its mere mention evokes the common good. Each kind of good carries the notion of the other by way of negation: to be common is not to be particular, and to be particular is not to be common. But the logical distinction between common and particular goods has not told us why or on what grounds the two goods are distinct in reality. We may suppose that their real distinction has something to do with the number of participants attracted to the good—either one participant, or more than one—but this explains their distinction only externally. Such an external description tells us little of what distinguishes the goods internally, or ontologically. Still less does the greater number of the common good's participants justify its claim to primacy over the particular good. De Koninck is right, therefore, to fix on the universal extension of higher goods as the principle of higher goods' distinction from lower goods. This principle tells us something real about common and particular goods themselves, something that is more than a mere description of things drawn to their goodness.

As a result of the universal extension of higher goods, the common good bears what De Koninck calls the "note of superabundance."⁸ He means that the common good possesses a superabundance of goodness, which by nature the particular good lacks. Numerically one, the particular good is capable of extending its goodness only to a single effect or participant. Because interiorly its goodness is minimal—a quality that, as a final cause, restricts its extension—the particular good can by nature satisfy only one beneficiary. By satisfying one beneficiary, the particular good cannot for that fact satisfy another. My ice cream cone is mine, for example, and no one else's. Also numerically one, the common good is by contrast capable of extending its goodness to many effects or participants. Because interiorly its goodness is abundant—a quality that, as a final cause, increases its extension—the common good can by nature satisfy many beneficiaries at once. By satisfying one, therefore, the common good is not for that fact

⁸ De Koninck, *Primauté*, 8.

prevented from satisfying another. The good of my family is mine, for example, but it is not mine alone. The good of my family belongs also to the other members of my family. While mine, the good of my family is also ours. Such then is the external effect of the common good's internal superabundance: in belonging to one, the common good belongs to all to whom its extensive goodness remains proper.

For De Koninck, the common good's "note of superabundance" distinguishes common goods ontologically from particular goods.

The note of superabundance is not the only principle of distinction between common and particular goods, however. Other principles flow from the common good's superabundant goodness. For example, De Koninck writes that the common good is "more communicable" than the particular good, which reveals the degree to which, due to its superabundance, the common good is "eminently diffusive of itself."⁹ In addition, De Koninck observes that the common good "extends itself to the individual more than the particular good." As more communicable, the common good has more of the individual's proper good to communicate. My family is more mine, for example, than my ice cream cone.

These three principles of distinction between common and particular goods—superabundance, communicability, and extension—lead De Koninck to declare the common good "the better good of the individual" than his particular good. In this brief statement, we see De Koninck's argument for the primacy of the common good beginning to take shape. Already, we can appreciate how his argument is not practical but ontological in nature.

Satisfied that he has adequately distinguished common goods from particular goods, De Koninck turns to apply this distinction against a manner of speaking by which particular goods are often confused for common goods.

The Common Good Is Not a Composite of Particular Goods

In accord with St. Thomas, De Koninck recognizes that the superiority of the common good over the particular good is qualitative and not merely quantitative. The common good is superior in form and not just in matter. The common good is truly better than the particular good, and not just bigger than it. Because Aquinas and De Koninck value the superiority of the common good as something objectively real, each is sensitive to

⁹ De Koninck, *Primaute*, 8.

how we obscure this reality in everyday speech. For example, De Koninck observes that we habitually label as “common goods” gathered quantities of particular goods. This is a misnomer, De Koninck argues, not only for implying that the common good is simply bigger than the particular good, but more importantly because a collection of particular goods bears no formal resemblance to the common good. De Koninck explains the formal difference between the common good and the particular good as follows: “The common good is better [than the particular good], but not because it might include the particular good of all individuals. So constituted, it would not have the unity of the common good as something universal. It would be a pure collection and, as such, only materially better [than the particular good].”¹⁰

A candy jar in a doctor’s office, a company’s pension fund, and a city’s water reservoir are “pure collections” of this kind. We routinely call these collections “common goods” because, as the source of particular benefits enjoyed commonly by individuals, the collection itself appears as a good common to its beneficiaries. But, as De Koninck explains, the collection only appears common. In reality, it is not, strictly speaking. While these collections may produce common effects—content children in a waiting room, for example—these collections are not formally common. They lack the principle distinctive of common goods properly so called, which is a unity that diffuses its goodness universally.

Unlike a common good, a “pure collection” of particular goods does not constitute a unity capable of diffusing its goodness wholly and universally to its participants. Instead, as an aggregate of particular goods, a collection diffuses goodness by dividing and dispersing the goods that it collects. Thus, what attracts individuals to the candy jar, the pension fund, and the water reservoir is not a single common good, but rather a multitude of particular goods: the jar’s many pieces of candy, the fund’s monthly disbursements, and the reservoir’s numerous gallons of water. Hence, despite our casual use of the term “common good” for these collections, De Koninck insists that we not confuse a collection of particular goods with a common good. The reason is that a collection differs only materially, or quantitatively, from the single particular goods that it collects. The collection is simply more of the particular good. Formally or qualitatively, therefore, one particular good and a collection of particular goods remain identical, for the goodness each diffuses carries the note of particularity. Neither carries the formal note of commonness. Qualitatively similar to

¹⁰ De Koninck, *Primauté*, 8.

the particular good, a collection of particular goods remains qualitatively dissimilar to the common good.

De Koninck reinforces the formal distinction between a common good and a collection of particular goods by highlighting the former's wide communicability. "The common good is better for each individual who participates in it, insofar as it is communicable to other individuals. Communicability is the very reason for its perfection."¹¹ As the common good diffuses itself, it communicates its abundant goodness, whole and undivided, to each and all of its participants. This is in contrast to the particular good, which communicates its limited goodness only to one beneficiary. A moral corollary follows immediately upon this ontological principle. De Koninck explains that breadth of communicability is so integral to the reality of a common good that, unless one embraces the common good as widely communicable, he does not embrace the common good properly. "The individual does not attain the common good under the very note of common good," De Koninck writes, "unless he attains it as communicable to others."¹² In other words, one cannot desire and enjoy a particular good and a common good in the same way. Each good must be loved according to its formal and not simply its material quality. The particular good is properly desired and enjoyed in its particularity. Likewise, the common good is properly desired and enjoyed in its commonness.

After reviewing the formal distinction between a common good and a collection of particular goods, De Koninck provides an example of a common good to illustrate just how, in contrast to a collection of particular goods, the common good diffuses and communicates its one goodness universally and widely. The example that De Koninck chooses is the common good of the family. "The good of the family is better than the particular good," De Koninck writes, "not because all the members of the family find their particular good in it; rather, the good of the family is better because, for each of its individual members, it is also the good of the others."¹³ De Koninck clarifies here that the family is not like a candy jar or a pension fund, a collection of particular goods out of which individuals commonly draw their particular lot. Rather, as a common good properly so called, the good of the family constitutes a single good that extends and communicates itself whole and entire to all the members of the family at once. For that reason, unlike a collection of particular goods, the family

¹¹ De Koninck, *Primauté*, 8.

¹² De Koninck, *Primauté*, 8.

¹³ De Koninck, *Primauté*, 8–9.

need not be divided in order for its good to be enjoyed by family members. Rather, the good of the family belongs to each member such that the whole good is entirely one member's and is also entirely another's. By belonging wholly to all members, the good of the family, as one good, is commonly distributed to them and thus commonly held by them.

**A Good Common *In Causando* Is Distinct
from a Good Common *In Praedicando***

Collections of particular goods are not the only kind of good that can appear common. St. Thomas himself applies the term "common good" widely to all sorts of goods that appear to generate common benefits. As Gregory Froelich has noted, Aquinas labels things as varied as "money, honor, victory, justice, peace, happiness, the perpetuation of the species, the order of the universe, the good convertible with being, God, and even children" as common goods.¹⁴ Despite his wide application of the term "common," however, Aquinas does not consider all of these goods to be common in the same way. He observes that some of these goods we only call common, while others are common in actual fact. Aquinas explains this distinction in article 6 of question 7 of *De veritate*.

A thing is called common in two ways. First, a thing may be called common by way of attainment or predication (*per praedicationem*), as when, through an act of reasoning, one thing is found in many things. What is more common in this sense is not more noble but more imperfect, as "animal" is more common but less perfect than "man." Thus is the life of nature more common than the life of glory. Second, a thing may be called common in recognition of its causality (*per modum causae*), as a cause that remains numerically one extends itself to multiple effects. In this way what is more common is nobler, as the preservation of the city is nobler than the preservation of a family. According to this second way, the life of nature is not more common than the life of glory.¹⁵

In this text, Aquinas distinguishes what is common *in praedicando* from what is common *in causando* in order to explain why the life of nature,

¹⁴ Gregory Froelich, "The Equivocal Status of *Bonum Commune*," *The New Scholasticism* 63, no. 1 (1989): 38–57, at 42.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 7, a. 6, ad 7.

which is found more commonly than the life of glory, is not for that fact nobler than the life of glory. The reason is that neither the life of nature nor the life of glory represents a cause. Each is rather a good found in multiple instances. Only a cause that is more common is for that fact nobler; as common, it is nobler because it extends itself to more effects. Because they are not causes, Aquinas concludes, the life of nature and the life of glory are common in some other sense, according to which what is more common is in fact inferior to what is less common.

Aquinas observes that “the life of nature” and “the life of glory” are not common causes but rather common names that we construct to signify what we find existing in numerous separate instances. What we find in all animate creatures we call the “the life of nature,” and what we find in the beatified we call the “the life of glory.” Though at times we may speak of life as a cause extending itself to living things, such talk is only metaphorical. We do not mean that there is an actual “life,” numerically one, extending itself to and animating various receptive forms. The extension of life takes place only in our reasoning as we predicate a common name to what is possessed individually by all living things. It is thus by predication—*in praedicando*—that life is something common. As Aquinas observes, what is more common by predication is inferior to what is less common, as in the case of the common names “man” and “animal.” Though less common *in praedicando* than “animal,” “man” is nobler, as it names something more perfect. Thus the life of glory, though less common *in praedicando* than the life of nature, is nobler than the life of nature.

By contrast, a good common *in causando* is a single reality that, through the exercise of final causality, extends goodness to many effects. It is thus that the good of the family and the good of the city are common. Numerically one, each as a final cause diffuses its goodness to many at once. As real causes, the good of the city is nobler than that of the family, as it is more common *in causando* and extends itself to more effects, including families.

This distinction between the good common *in praedicando* and the good common *in causando* is crucial for understanding the heart of De Koninck’s project of reviving a classical sense of commonness for a modern audience. In defending the primacy of the common good, De Koninck means to exalt, above the particular good of the individual, goods common *in causando* and not goods merely common *in praedicando*. These latter are in themselves, despite their common predication, goods held individually and particularly. Again, the scholarship of Froelich is helpful here. He explains how the commonness of goods common *in praedicando* is only virtual and not actual: “Health, temperance, and knowledge are goods

realized in individuals, but they take on a universal character in the intellect. What really exist are many individual habits of health, temperance, and knowledge.”¹⁶ In other words, unlike goods common *in causando*, goods like health, temperance, and knowledge are not goods numerically one that many can pursue at once. Rather, each is a good numerically one in individuals who possesses health or temperance or knowledge. In a group, therefore, there exists not one health, one temperance, or one knowledge, but individuals who are healthy, temperate, or knowledgeable.

It should be apparent by now that when we speak of the common good of the family and the common good of health, for example, we are employing the term “common” in an equivocal manner. These two goods—the first common *in causando* and the second common *in praedicando*—are not common in the same manner. Health is a good that acquires a single, common quality only in the intellect while it remains multiple and particular in reality. By contrast, the family is a good numerically one in reality that diffuses its goodness commonly to many effects at once. In *The Primacy of the Common Good*, De Koninck does not press the equivocal status of these two uses of “common,” but he is certainly aware of it. In comparison to the particular goods of individuals, he elevates only goods common *in causando* as being higher and nobler.

Before closing, it is important to recall that predicating as common something not causally common does not represent an error in reasoning or in speech. We do not have to correct our interlocutors every time that they call health, or truth, or virtue a common good. Because we can distinguish goods common *in praedicando* from goods common *in causando*, we can employ both modes of attribution intelligently, alert to the kind of commonness we are treating in each instance.

Conclusion

Commonness becomes conceptually less slippery once we understand how it is metaphysically constituted. To this end, three truths regarding commonness must be recognized: (1) commonness is an ontological reality and not just a logical or practical one; (2) commonness is primarily in things and not only in their effects; (3) commonness introduces real diversity into created being and created goodness. This last point bears particularly on the mystery of human happiness. The metaphysical diversity

¹⁶ Gregory Froelich, “On the Common Goods,” *The Aquinas Review* 12 (2005): 1–28, at 9.

written providentially into things introduces moral variety into human life. In so doing, commonness constitutes not only the ontological foundation of family and political life, providing the principle of communication in all human societies. Commonness also constitutes the ladder on which the intellectual creature—reaching from one higher and common good to the next—climbs knowingly and lovingly toward God. For the sake of pursuing our natural and supernatural happiness intelligently, therefore, we moderns and post-moderns must master the concept of commonness again. St. Thomas and his faithful interpreters provide us the philosophical tools necessary for this revival. NEV